

World Social Forum: Africa at the heart of the debates

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This is the first time that so many Africans, men and women, had come to a World Social Forum. The attendance was five to seven times bigger than in the preceding African Social Forums and was more representative of the diversities of the countries of Africa.

They had never been so many workshops concentrating on the African reality of capitalist globalization and making possible the expression of the diversity of opinion that exists. Thus for example the presence of the homosexuals and lesbians of Africa was visible from the opening ceremony onwards, and under the big tent where a diversity of generations and origins mingled, in a continent where the stigmatization, indeed the repression of homosexuality are still considered to be normal. Solidarity links were established for the abolition of foreign military bases in Africa. Chinese activists discussed with Africans the nature of China's present relations with Africa- neo-colonialism or South-South solidarity? African and French associations discussed France's neo-colonial relations with Africa. The Guinean delegation gave information on the criminal repression of strikers which had just led to 50 deaths, and a protest demonstration took place.

This African presence suffered, however, from the large space that was occupied by the Christian churches in relation to the space occupied by the radical currents. Better equipped financially, the churches were able to take charge of the massive participation of Africans, both from Kenya and from elsewhere. The organizing committee closed the door to the radical shanty town associations, by installing a discrimination based on money, with prohibitive registration fees that were the equivalent of a quarter of the local minimum wage. This was a way of keeping out the "wretched of the earth" of Kenya, who were independent of the opulent NGOs.

The radical current finally managed to show itself with the action conducted by the radical associations for the poor to have free access to the WSF site. The presence of a large number of commercial stands also provoked sharp criticisms of the "commodification" of the social forum. An action demanding "free meals" was organized against a restaurant belonging to the Kenyan Minister of the Interior, which was offering meals at prohibitive prices. The omnipresence of the mobile telephone multinational Celtel was also denounced. Peoples Parliament - activists from the Kibera shanty town - who had been excluded from the preparation of the WSF, organized an alternative forum in a public garden in the centre of the city. The radical nature of the global justice consciousness was demonstrated by its spokespersons, particularly the very calm Wangui Mbatia, who gave a different image of the inhabitants of the shanty towns.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint website.

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